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ABSTRACT

The ways in which, and the extent to which, changes in viewer positioning mediate the diegesis of commercial television news is problematic, since television news is generally considered to be "non-fiction." Diegesis can be defined as the depicted real-world. The choices made in depicting the scene have implications as to the positioning of the viewer. A direct address depiction might have a narrator telling what happened. Indirect address might be the live "raw" images of the event, without commentary, but with "natural" sound from a remote microphone. News producers perceive the more diegetic production elements as more influential or persuasive. Thus, the economics of television require that "informational" programming avoid controversy, and when forced to deal with it, do so in an innocuous way. For this reason, highly diegetic positioning elements in news stories about controversial policy issued or international affairs are rarely seen. There has also developed a sense of journalistic ethics about positioning techniques. It would follow that the less diegetic the level of imaging, the more honest, more ethical the material. However, everything brought to the viewer on the evening news has been subjectively selected, edited, and manipulated. The paper closes with the question: "if this mediated material is presented in such a way as to feign a 'That's the way it is' diegesis, is the viewer then, being positioned as a dupe?" (Sixteen references are attached and one figure is included.) (RAE)

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Television News Imagery:

A Hierarchy of Diegetic Mediation Through Viewer Positioning

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RUNNING HEAD: VIEWER POSITIONING IN T.V. NEWS

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Abstract

The essay examines varying levels of address and other viewer-related elements of television news imagery, in the context of mediated diegesis. A hierarchy is proposed for analysis of television news stories within such a context. Discussion of the framework focuses on producer-perceived persuasiveness, commercial implications, and ethics of news presentation.

Television News Imagery: A Hierarchy of

Diegetic Mediation Through Viewer Positioning

Bill Nichols (1981) explains that the two acknowledged forms of address in non-fiction film or television are *direct address* and *indirect address*. The classifications are not always exact, and often the two overlap in varying degrees. The distinction between the two depends "on whether the viewer is explicitly acknowledged as the subject to whom the film is addressed" (p.182).

The subject or *viewer* can be addressed either by characters (social actors) or by a narrator. That address can be either synchronous with the image-track, as in the case of the authoritative on-screen narrator or expert, or non-synchronous, as in the case of the "voice of God" narrative style. (Nichols, 1981, p. 183).

This understanding of *address* corresponds in a very direct relationship with the basic concept of *viewer positioning*. (The term *viewer* will be used here, rather than *spectator* or *subject*, simply because it is a conventional term in the television industry. The term is meant to encompass the auditory experiences in television viewing as well.) Each address variant positions the viewer in a specific way.

Here, I'll explore the ways in which, and the extent to which changes in viewer positioning mediate the diegesis of commercial television news. The preceding statement assumes that diegesis exists in television news. This is problematic since television news is generally considered to be "non-fiction."

(I'll treat that as a given for the purposes of this article, recognizing the continuing debate over objectivity and realism in news.)

Indirect address is the primary mode in fictional narrative, and is central to the classical concept of diegesis. Brannigan (1981) defines as diegetic: "those aspects of the fictional world which are accessible to the characters" (p.61). An example then, of a diegetic sound, might be a teapot whistle which we and the character can hear. A very similar whistling sound, if it is part of synthesized background music might well be non-diegetic.

The traditional and fiction-based definition of diegesis doesn't serve me in this case, so I'll borrow (and subtract) from Nichols' (1981) by operationally defining diegesis as the depicted real-world. For example, when we see live video of a riot in Manilla or Queens, though the characters are real and the "plot" is non-fiction, we consider the real world of the police, rioters, victims, etc. as the diegesis. This riot can be shown to us in many different ways. The choices made in depicting the scene have implications as to the positioning of the viewer. A direct address depiction might have a narrator telling us what happened. Indirect address might be the live "raw" images of the event, without commentary, but "natural" sound from a remote microphone.

By exploring the common variations in viewer positioning, I'll propose that there are varying degrees or levels of diegesis presented by each. This could be justified as more than idle curiosity since television news producers often purport that their product is "balanced," if not objective. If television news is to be accurate and truly non-fictional, then it is important to reduce any mystery

surrounding its production. Robert Demming asks,

> What is the relation between one's socio-economic position in society and culture and the dominant ideology and hegemonic structure of television formations? . . . We must be alert to the degree of perhaps unrecognized competence that social subjects bring to the encounter with television discourse and to the levels of interdiscursivity and complex intertextuality in a subject's social history which allow him to assume differential subject positions in a variety of televisual encounters (1985, p.48).

Nichols expresses a similar rationalization for such exposure of the manner in which the viewer is addressed.

> It is clear that the manner in which the viewer is addressed, the precise way in which the desire to know is invoked and gratified by the exposition, is a matter of political importance. It is a point of intersection between ideology and text whose parameters and implications need much closer examination, to avoid the risk of overgeneralization about its tyranny, and to specify precisely at what levels ideological operations are in greatest force and how to contest them (1981, p.206-207).

Lest these reasons sound too altruistic, Annette Kuhn provides ample justification for academic inquiry into the world of the non-fiction spectator. "There is a notable absence of writing on the subject . . . with regard to the modes of address and subject positions" (1978, p.133).

The Viewer

It may be fruitful now to examine a few models of the television news

spectator. We can thus aquire some notion of what the overall viewing experience is like.

Kuhn (1978) explains that documentary film research has minimized, if not ignored the role of the spectator. She tells us it has simply been assumed that the viewer is inherently neutral, and receptive to the presented filmic truths. The locus of observation in most critical writing on documentary has been either the "neutral" camera (basically the theatrical convention of the fourth wall) or the cine-eye, the camera as extension of cameraperson/participant. Kuhn proposes that we ought to think more about the characteristics of the spectator as observer.

A few people have attempted to discover and describe the qualities of the television news viewer. Gary Kishi, former News Director at KENW-TV, once said he had the perfect model of the home viewer, in-house, in the form of a particular broadcast engineer. Kishi said all one had to do was picture this technician relaxing at home, in a tee-shirt, with a six-pack of COORS, and program the newscast to keep his attention (personal communication, 1980).

In a somewhat more academic context, Michelle Himes (1985) tells us that all network television -- especially news, is direct address. "the narrative device of direct address, . . . constitutes the most prevalent and one of the fundamental characteristics of the network television discourse, as central to an understanding of the medium as the concept of 'flow'" (p.28). In a flurry of "cine-centric McCluhanism" she points out that even the technology of television is direct address. "The unacknowledged complicity of the spectator's

gaze with the beam of the cinema projector gives way to the open aggression of the television address" (p.29). Certainly Himes offers much more in support of her position than the technology angle, concentrating a great deal on viewer positioning.

> Network television combines these two narrative forms, [diegesis & direct address] alternating direct address and fictional closure with a rapidity and continuousness unprecedented in any other art form. Psychologically the result of this alternation is a disruption of the classic voyeuristic position of the cinema spectator (1985. p.30).

She argues primarily that television's direct address is favorable to the psychology of advertising. Her arguments seem to portray the *commercial* television viewer as somehow worse-off than the "classic" voyeur of the cinema. Himes does offer a ray of hope, however, in her prediction that home VCR rentals and pay-cable will rescue us from direct address television and make more nearly "film-type" audiences of us once again.

Michael Woal (1982) gives television a lower aesthetic status than the cinema as well; not based on its poorer image or soundtrack quality, but in large part due to viewer positioning. He claims that television, partly because of its immediacy and directness, is practical, rhetorical, and therefore "non-art. . . Television viewing is not conducive to the defamiliarization of aesthetic experience" (p.32).

From Dennis Giles' 1985 article "Television Reception," we learn that television is viewed while doing other things, and as a result viewers are less

attentive. Gary Marshall has been saying this for years. He's claimed that the phenomenal success of his television shows "Happy Days" and "LaVerne & Shirley" was due in large part to the fact that he produced programs for people who were looking at the tear in the drapes or noticing the carpet needed to be replaced.

Perhaps the most detailed model of the television news viewer was developed by Robert Demming (1985). Demming presents a model of a highly complex "televisual spectator-subject." He emphasizes that we should consider the historical, social, cultural and ideological backgrounds of the viewers as they watch the tube.

> It is now too tenuous to continue to insist that these signifying processes embody the dominant ideology of a culture which construct spectators in particular positions. Representations of the dominant hegemony may be and usually are, embedded in texts, but not all spectators decode them in the same way (p.50).

Demming speaks as if this complexity of reçeiver is somehow unique to the television viewer. One has to ask if film spectators were ever any more homogeneous -- or consumers of paintings, sculpture, the theatre , live sports, etc. for that matter. Demming also recommends that we consider *television* in its broader technological, economic, institutional and historical contexts. A model is supposed to allow researchers to observe the interactions of the vital elements of a phenomenon, free from the confounding of insignificant elements (Fisher, 1978). This model seems to recomplicate, rather than isolate or

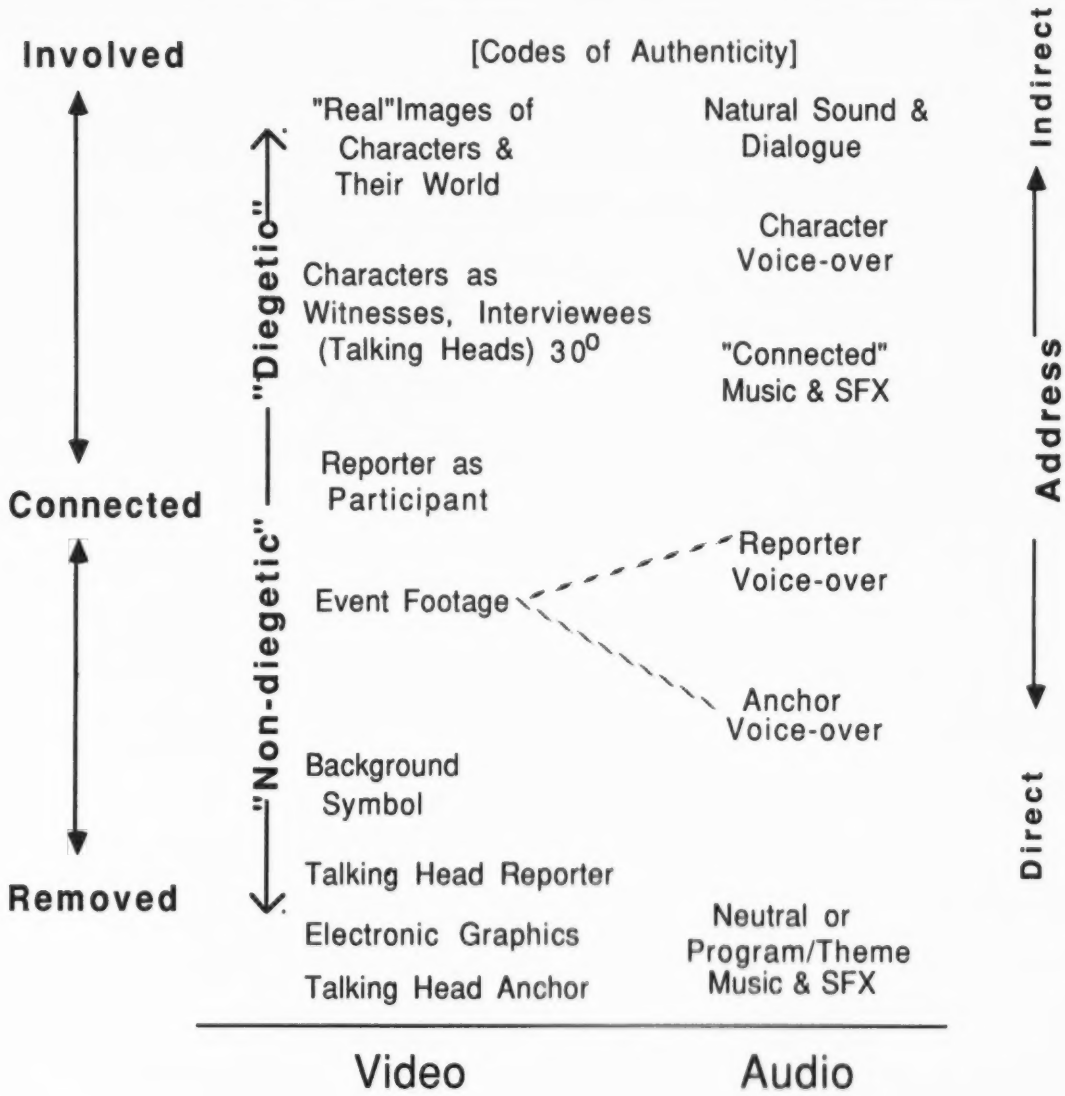
clarify, certain very simple concepts often discussed in the most basic Communication courses. Every individual comes to a communication event with her own distinct field of experience. That communication, whether interpersonal, or mediated takes place within a broader context.

Diegesis

Whether or not the preceding review clarifies anything about the nature of the TV news viewer, it enables a more specific look at the varying levels of diegesis presented in specific TV newscasts (See Figure 1). Note that movement up and down the scale is fluid, and the levels are not discrete or graduated. There is often overlap. Remember, diegesis is operationally defined as the real world of the "characters" in the news, which is of course the viewer's real world as well. Since even live coverage is highly mediated, true diegesis cannot be obtained. The graph, therefore, serves to illustrate which elements of viewer positioning are *more nearly* diegetic or more nearly non-diegetic.

The first level is referred to as the **Removed** level. It includes the least-diegetic elements, is highly mediated, often involves very direct address, and thus removes the viewer from the real world of the characters in the news story. (The anchor persons and reporters are not considered characters in this discussion, but mediators, along with producers, directors, and camera operators.) The positioning elements at the Removed level often include a "talking-head" anchor facing the camera, and addressing the viewer directly. The viewer is positioned away from the described action of the story. The anchor stands firmly between the spectator and the diegesis of the characters.

Elements of Viewer Positioning in TV News



Some non-diegetic elements at the Removed level include: program or theme music (unrelated to a specific story), the reading of a prepared script, direct address, anchor voice-overs (though we may see footage of the characters and their real world, they don't hear the voice of the anchor), and synthetic graphics, iconically related to the story, (corner graphics, names, statistics, etc.)

As we move up the diegetic scale, we find positioning elements which indicate a more **Connected** relationship between the viewer and the characters. One might feel closer to the diegesis of the events. The "field report" is often presented at this level. The anchor addressed us from a desk with a three-color digital graphic over her shoulder, but the reporter is on location, and the image over his shoulder is the "real" thing, the capitol building, a fireman on a ladder, city hall, etc. Though his voice-over of the event images may be just as scripted, at least we believe he is there, connecting us to what is really happening. He is able to conduct interviews, and even let the characters themselves speak as "witnesses" to the event, or experts on a topic.

A characteristic element at this level is the reporter as participant (he enters the world of the characters, interacts), the interviewees address the reporter directly but the camera only at approximately a 30^{o} angle. The characters and viewers are aware of each other, but connected only through the reporter and the mediation he represents. Graphics and voice-overs can temporarily remind us of the remote position we maintain, and the "wrap-up"

and "hand-off" transfer us back to the direct address anchor.

The third, and more nearly diegetic level represented is referred to as **Involved.** The real sights and sounds of the event are presented to us in an indirect address: no narration, no reporter's questions, and the characters don't recognize the camera or the viewer, except perhaps by accident. We hear actual "dialogue" and "natural" sound. Here, non-diegetic elements simultaneously signify that this is the "real" world of the characters, as well as remind us that we are not truly involved. Such devices have, on occassion been referred to as "codes of documentary authenticity." Examples include: pulling focus, unsteady camera movements and undifferentiated sound.

Certainly these three levels are intermixed a great deal in television news. The program may open with background music and a direct address lead-in only to have the anchor turn and face the reporter (or a monitor representing her) for the lead, cut to interviews, back to computer graphics with mixed sound effects, cut again to live "involvement"-level footage, and then return to the "removed" mediation of the anchor.

Commercial Breaks

It should be recognized that in a very real way commercials constitute more than one-fourth of a 30-minute newscast. Annette Kuhn (1978) tells us that commercials are basically all direct address, and I won't begin to apply the mediated-levels template to ad content, at least not here. But what about the portions of the newscast that lead and follow commercials? When the anchor introduces a news story, she will often look slightly to one side toward a

monitor, as if to conjure up the report. Is the switch from direct to slightly indirect address designed to heigten our attention? With a commercial break however, we often receive all sorts of non-diegetic cues just before the ad cluster. We *dissolve* (not cut) to a 90° angle view of the anchor and desk (a "bumper" shot), music swells, and then we dissolve to a commercial. We may even "dip to black" for a split second. Nichols and Koskinen tell us that this process cues the spectator that it is okay to participate more emotionally with the messages in the ads. According to my previous speculations, this pre-commercial bombardment of non-diegetic sounds and visuals would signify a very *remote* level of diegesis and therefore lessen the viewer's involvement with what immediately follows.

Perhaps neither is true. Perhaps the bumper-shot does exactly what the television director will tell us it does -- simply separating the news from the ads. If so, the spectator may be able to attend specifically to the images, messages and diegetic levels inherent in each commercial.

With so much importance attributed to the concept of "flow" in television, this would seem a lucrative question for applied inquiry. Is the first spot after Tom Brokaw's bumper shot more or less successful (persuasive) than the same ad situated just after an intense, involving, cliff-hanger sequence of Dynasty, or a commercial lead-in by Johnny Carson? How would these findings effect the newscasts, if at all?

Discussion

Are there then, any reasons for, or strategies behind the specific choices

made for viewer positioning and levels of diegesis in the news itself? If so, could these reasons be political?, ideological?, purposeful in any way beyond matters of style and convenience? "It is almost never possible or practical to air an entire news interview. The reporter must edit the piece and usually bridge the actualities with explanatory voice-overs and/or stand-ups. In addition, the reporter is almost always under a strict deadline in writing this account" (Hudson & Ortiz, 1986).

Maaret Koskinen posits that the television newscast is designed specifically to reduce the viewers' emotional connection with the story. "to win assent for the proposition that what happens 'out there' need not perturb" (In Nichols, 1985, p.175).

My postulation is that news producers *perceive* the more diegetic production elements as more influential or *persuasive*. Whether the material we see on the evening news really is persuasive, or even involving, does not matter here. My proposal deals only with the possibility that those responsible for bringing us the news view the high-diegesis techniques (often found in American direct cinema) as more likely to *seem* persuasive. And, if there is anything commercial television executives do not want to seem through their NEWS programming -- it's persuasive.

It is often said that television news helped turn the tide of public sentiment against the war in Vietnam. Were the scripted stories from talking-head anchors the persuasive element? or perhaps the moving color images of war dead and wounded American boys asking aloud why they were there? What

could be more authentic than the physical shaking of the television image as a morter round strikes nearby? The viewer hears "nat-sound" bullets zing through the air, and even the cameraman ducks, rendering the visual image undiscernible (but not unconvincing). It is often necessary to add narration, graphics and the strictures of a script to convey the information and further illustrate, but raw images -- visual and aural may be the real persuaders.

Certainly this approach can be criticized on a number of grounds. First of all, it depends on a very simplistic understanding of persuasion. A rhetorician might say that I am writing-off the elements of logos and ethos in favor of the involving qualities of pathos. Maybe so, but again I am not claiming an empirically provable persuasiveness in these techniques, just speculating that such a *perception* may be widely held in the television industry, and illustrated in the way these techniques are used or avoided. Few television journalists are students of Classical Rhetoric.

An obvious response to my assertion would be to point out the specific instances of television editorials within newscasts. They are almost without exception, highly mediated, direct address, talking head deliveries. The level of diegesis is highly *removed*. If this kind of viewer positioning is perceived by editorial originators as less persuasive than other techniques at their disposal, then what's the point? Isn't this precisely where the media wish to persuade?

No. Not in the case of commercial television in the United States anyway. The economics of television require that "informational" programming avoid controversy, and when forced to deal with it, do so in an innocuous way. For

this reason, we rarely see highly diegetic positioning elements in news stories about controversial policy issues or international affairs. The human interest story about the pig that rescued the drowning girl, or the woman recovering from heart surgery, however will likely be chock full of natural sound, character narration, and "real" dialogue. In the case of editorials, though intentions are probably good, they are necessarily watered down in image content as well as script. In fact the word "editorial" has been virtually replaced with the less offensive "commentary" in broadcast applications. If broadcasters are to avoid controversy in order to maintain the largest number of viewers and advertising dollars, then television news must not appear fashioned for influence. A facade of responsible objectivity is the key. On Thanksgiving Eve, 1986 after President Reagan's administration was rocked by the biggest political scandal of the decade, John Chancellor's NBC commentary told us nothing more than "It must be frustrating."

Ethics

There has also developed a sense of journalistic ethics about the positioning techniques discussed in this paper. A news director is likely to be heard telling the green field reporter "This is serious, so don't get 'artsy-craftsy' on me." Old-school ethics remain intact on the safer ground of the *removed* diegetic level. Balance, of course, is an illusive goal, and the choices that seem safe may simply be perceived by some elements as preserving the ideology of the status quo. Consider the Glasgow University Media Group's critique of British television's trade union coverage.

> Our analysis goes beyond saying merely that the television news "favour" certain individuals and institutions by giving them more time and status. . . in the end it relates to the picture of society in general and industrial society in particular, that television news constructs. This at its most damaging includes, . . . the laying of blame for society's industrial and economic problems at the door of the workforce. This is done in the face of contradictory evidence which, when it appears, is either ignored, smothered, or at worst, is treated as if it supports the inferential frameworks utilised by the producers of the news (1976, pp.268-269).

On the other hand, David Congalton an Instructor at Depauw University finds public concern over "Dan Rather and the 'liberal bias' of CBS" important enough to devote significant class time to it (1986, p.25).

Though not in exactly the same terminology, ethical questions about the recognition and use of viewer positioning have been raised by those who have worked in direct cinema and cinema verite (Pennebacker, Leacock, Rouche, the Maysles) and explored by those who write about such films (Pryluck, 1976, and Egan, 1982). Jay Ruby (1981) believes that "the maker of images has the moral obligation to reveal the covert, to never appear to produce an objective mirror for the world to see its true image (p.4). Inasmuch as self-reflexivity may be considered more ethical than the pretense of "fly-on-the-wall" objectivity, it would follow that the less diegetic the level of imaging, the more honest, more ethical the material. Everything brought to us on the evening news has been subjectively selected, edited, and manipulated. If this mediated material is

presented in such a way as to feign a "That's the way it is" diegesis, is the viewer then, being positioned as a dupe?

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